

INDIAN GIVING

NATIVE ORGANIZATIONS ARE SHAPING CHILDREN'S FUTURES



Let there be no purpose in giving save reciprocity. For to a people whose spirituality lies within Life's wholeness Who share the gifts of the sky and the mountains and the seas and the forests Who exchange abundance in the circle of animal brethren Giving is not a matter of pure altruism and benevolence But a mutual responsibility To make the world a better place.

—Excerpted from The Indian Giver by Rebecca Adamson 1991

By Rhonda Barton

1) Both Lindsey (left) and Shannon came to West Anchorage High from small island communities. They take advantage of core academic classes in a special program at their school, operated by the Cook Inlet Tribal Council. (Photos by Rhonda Barton, except where otherwise noted)



2) Susan Anderson directs the CIRI Foundation, the largest of Alaska's 13 regional Native corporation foundations.



3) Sarah Scanlan, education director of the First Alaskans Institute, heads the Alaska Business Education Compact, an organization that prepares youth for work and lifelong learning. (Photo courtesy of First Alaskans Institute)



4) Schools in 11 Oregon counties have benefited from the Grand Ronde's Spirit Mountain Community Trust, directed by Angela Blackwell.

ANCHORAGE, Alaska, and GRAND RONDE, Oregon—

From the potlatch and the whale hunt to the traditional giveaway, reciprocity is a cornerstone of Northwest indigenous culture. The term “Indian giver,” in its original sense, wasn’t tinged with a pejorative connotation. Rather, as the First Nations Development Institute points out, “the true meaning signifies a willingness to care, an expectation of sharing, (and) a cultural commitment to reciprocity that was not to be questioned.”

Even the early explorers, coming to claim the New World for their royal patrons, benefited from this tradition of sharing. Christopher Columbus remarked on the generosity of the Natives encountered when he landed on North American soil. His journal notes, “No request of anything from them is ever refused, but they rather invite acceptance of what they possess, and manifest such a generosity that they would give away their own hearts.”

More than 500 years later, Native philanthropy is being used not only to redistribute wealth and bolster economic self-sufficiency, but also as a tool to influence and support educational practices. Backed by funds derived from oil, timber, gaming, real estate development, and other business interests, Alaska Native and American Indian leaders are making their voices heard—

especially when it comes to closing the achievement gap for Native students.

Creating Awareness

Nowhere is the voice stronger than in Alaska, where Native children comprise more than a quarter of all public school students. The First Alaskans Institute is leading the charge for educational reform, fueled by a \$20 million endowment from Alyeska Pipeline Service Company. The funds were awarded to settle claims concerning Native hiring on the trans-Alaska oil and gas pipeline project. “We serve as a catalyst and convener through research to create an awareness of the state of education (in Alaska) and of what has to happen to solve our problems,” explains First Alaskans Education Director Sarah Scanlan.

In just the three years since its founding, the institute has organized three high-level summits and commissioned a statewide study of Alaska Native values and opinions on education. First Alaskans has also supported the education consortium made up of representatives from the 13 regional Native corporations’ foundations. “We helped that group come together to understand collectively what they’re doing, how they’re doing it, and how to improve,” says Scanlan, adding that the consortium received \$1 million from the institute for postsecondary scholarships for its members.

Scanlan, who is affiliated with the Inupiat tribe, knows firsthand the damage that has been wrought in the name of education. As a product of the “boarding home” program, Scanlan was sent from Kotzebue, her small village above Nome, to live with a family in Fairbanks to finish high school. “Imagine how hard it was not only on us kids, but on our families,” she remembers. “The helpers—the older, stronger kids who got the water, got the ice, cared for the little kids, helped the uncles with hunting—all of us were shipped out. We lost that connection with our families, and it put a tremendous burden on them.”

It’s not surprising that the First Alaskans’ study found that lack of educational role models, parents’ actions regarding education, and problems at home are among the main barriers to academic success for Native students. The research also reinforced the need for a curriculum that embraces Alaska Native culture, more Native educators, and more parental participation in their children’s education. “We know it’s going to take time to undo where we are; we didn’t get here overnight,” observes Scanlan. “We know we’ve got to have community, family, and parental involvement, (and) they’ve got to drive the local agenda for education.”

Partners for Success

Figuring out the different ways parents can be involved in their children’s education is uppermost in Amy Loyd’s mind. Loyd oversees K–12 educational services for the Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC) and directs an unusual program serving 1,000 Native students in eight Anchorage public schools.

At West Anchorage High, the brusque sounds of the Yup’ik language drift out of a classroom in the Cove, a rounded wing jutting from the front of the school. The Cove is home to Kanakngaq—Inupiaq for “west wind”—a Native student school-within-a-school. CITC’s Partners for Success program provides staff to Kanakngaq and directly serves 160 teens who make up half the Alaska Natives in West’s 2,400-member student body. Through CITC’s program, students steep themselves in traditional culture as well as receive instruction in core subjects such as reading, writing, and math.

The program is a partnership between the Tribal Council and the Anchorage School District. The district provides CITC with space and resources in four high schools and four middle schools. In turn, CITC offers core and elective accredited classes and comprehensive services to students and their families with a five-person team—including an academic counselor and a family

40 advocate—in each location. The students self-select to join the program, spending one or two periods a day in CITC classes and the rest in mainstream classrooms.

Lindsey Mercurief, a junior, arrived at West Anchorage High last year from St. George, the southernmost island in the Pribilofs. Making the transition from an island with a million fur seals but fewer than 150 people would have been much more difficult without CITC and the Kanakgaq program. “It’s like a whole big village here,” says Mercurief, looking up from her computer. “It’s helped me a lot with my math and when you’re feeling down, the teachers will push aside whatever they’re doing to talk to you.”

“Straddling two worlds is a struggle for all our students,” notes Loyd. “Whether or not they came from the village or grew up in Anchorage on MTV and skateboarding, they still are of Native heritage and have to determine what that means to them.”

Loyd, an “Outside Indian”—meaning she hails from another state “outside” of Alaska—says the CITC program uses the philosophical precepts of the Chugach School District model (see story, Page 17), coupled with 100 percent dedication to the Native community. “We really are following three new R’s if you will: relevance, rigor, and—above all—relationships,” she says. “We

care about our students as individuals, get to know them and their families, and build a relationship of trust together.”

While Partners for Success is funded primarily by federal grants, it owes its existence to Cook Inlet Region Incorporated or CIRI, which established CITC and a series of other successful nonprofits to serve its shareholders’ health, education, and welfare needs. The corporation is CITC’s “mothership,” providing organizational support.

CIRI, one of 13 regional corporations set up with funds from the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971, lists “youth and education” as one of its three focus areas for corporate giving. Like the other regional corporations, CIRI’s charitable giving historically has concentrated on postsecondary scholarships for Native youth. Now, though, there’s a growing recognition that more emphasis must be placed on the pre-college years.

Beating the Drum

“We understand that’s important because, when kids don’t make it through those grades, they don’t take advantage of the postsecondary opportunities,” says Susan Anderson, president and chief executive officer of the CIRI Foundation. She adds that with a \$42 million endowment from the corporation, the CIRI Foundation is in a position to take a leadership role in “beating the

drum” for education.

“It’s not always through offering money,” Anderson believes, “but offering a voice, time, and the influence of people we know to talk to others who need to understand the Alaska Native education issue.” The foundation seeks collaborations that leverage the ability to enhance PK–16 education.

Anderson, a CIRI shareholder who belongs to the Tlingit tribe, is proud of the foundation’s track record during its 21-year history. “We’ve significantly increased the number of shareholders who have an education, and they have an expectation of their children to go to school at a very high percentage,” she points out. “The goal of providing an opportunity for economic self-sufficiency through education has really come to be.”

Still, Anderson acknowledges that Native students continue to suffer from lower achievement and higher dropout rates than their non-Native peers, in Alaska and throughout the nation. She thinks that passage of the No Child Left Behind Act may help turn that around by bringing education to the forefront.

Meanwhile, the CIRI Foundation is underwriting outreach efforts by Partners for Success and working to place Alaska Native teachers in Anchorage schools. It’s also a prime supporter of the Alaska Native Heritage Center, a cultural facility that

offers students traditional art and dance classes, leadership training, and technology programs.

For the past two years, the foundation has paid for 6,300 Anchorage students to visit the stunning wood and glass center that sits on 26 wooded acres. “It’s not just Native kids, but all kids in third and fourth grades,” Anderson says enthusiastically. “Some of the Native kids are not in touch with their traditional ways, having grown up in an urban setting, and they have the opportunity to go and learn more about their culture while their (non-Native) classmates see them in a different, more positive light.”

Keeping a Promise

Sharing Native assets with the greater community and helping all school children is how members of Oregon’s Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde are honoring their traditions and fulfilling a promise. Almost 30 years after the government terminated the Grand Ronde, the 26 tribes won back federal recognition. “In those efforts (for restoration of tribal rights), we told the community, ‘We’re not looking for a handout. If you give us your support, we’ll help ourselves and you,’” says tribal member Angela Blackwell who heads Grand Ronde’s foundation.

Grand Ronde has met that pledge beyond anyone’s expectations: The tribes’ education program spans a lifetime of learning from

CONSIDER THIS

Sarah Scanlan of the First Alaskans Institute came to the world of philanthropy from the human resources side of the corporate sector.

“As an HR manager, you get people coming to you, wanting to go to work,” she recalls. “I recognized that a lot of people were ill prepared skillwise, which is no problem because you can teach them skills, but they were also lacking personal skills. You’re getting people who haven’t had exposure to training or experience in being independent, being on time every day, fulfilling expectations of productivity. That’s what got me into education, [knowing] that we’ve got to figure out a way to teach this stuff . . . and realizing that the issue is not just piling grants on top of grants, but working for long-term, systemic change.”

Scanlan offers the following recommendations for others trying to influence education in Native communities:

- “Understand the value Native leaders with vision can bring to the table, driving what they want kids to know and be able to do.”
- “Have a clear understanding, at the grassroots level, of the role of families and the community in supporting children in their education.”
- “Ensure that there’s a component to address who we are as indigenous people and make sure our kids learn it.”
- “Create a reform structure that truly is different from the Western education system and results in academic success.”
- “Send the message that we value education, and we want to grow our own in every professional area. We will never have self-determination unless our own people are delivering it.”

preschool through adult education classes. Reaching out to non-Natives, Grand Ronde’s Spirit Mountain Community Fund has awarded \$22 million in grants to nonprofit programs since 1997. Each year, 6 percent of the profits from the tribes’ thriving casino is funneled into the trust, an amount that’s triple the average percentage set aside by other Native gaming enterprises. “We far surpass others in giving,” remarks Blackwell, “because our casino is so successful and our revenue is greater.”

Indeed, the sprawling gaming/hotel complex—nestled in the coastal hills about a two-hour drive west of Portland—throbs with the sounds of slot machines, roulette wheels, and bingo calls 24 hours a day. Boasting more than 180,000 square feet, Spirit Mountain Casino is Oregon’s number one tourist attraction and a veritable cash cow. Last year, it generated a net profit of \$72 million.

The money that flows to the community fund is gifted to nonprofit organizations in an 11-county area of Western Oregon that represents the tribes’ aboriginal lands. “Our approach has been to enhance classroom experiences, not by giving to the schools, but to nonprofits that work with school children,” notes Blackwell. Thus, Spirit Mountain supports a statewide reading mentorship program, underwrites field

trips to museums, and brings the Portland Opera to rural schools.

It also provides nonoperating support for targeted projects at the two school districts in closest proximity to the casino. The Sheridan School District received more than \$200,000 to revise its language arts and literacy curricula and implement a new K–12 math program. Willamina School District was able to buy almost \$150,000 worth of new textbooks, thanks to Spirit Mountain. “We’d have to get by with less (without Spirit Mountain),” declares former Willamina Superintendent Roger Sauer. “If we’re looking at a special program, anything beyond the basics, it would be really difficult to do without them.”

In a radical departure from policy, the community trust also gave Willamina \$175,000 to keep Grand Ronde Elementary, with its 50 percent Native student enrollment, operating for one year while the district and state worked to resolve budget issues. It was a tough decision, recalls Blackwell. “In times of crisis, you sometimes make exceptions. (But) we don’t want to let the taxpayer and the legislature off the hook. The state has the responsibility to support equal education for all.”

“Funding solutions, not Band-Aids” is Blackwell’s mission and, like her fellow Native philanthropists, the traditions of an ancient culture guide the way. ■